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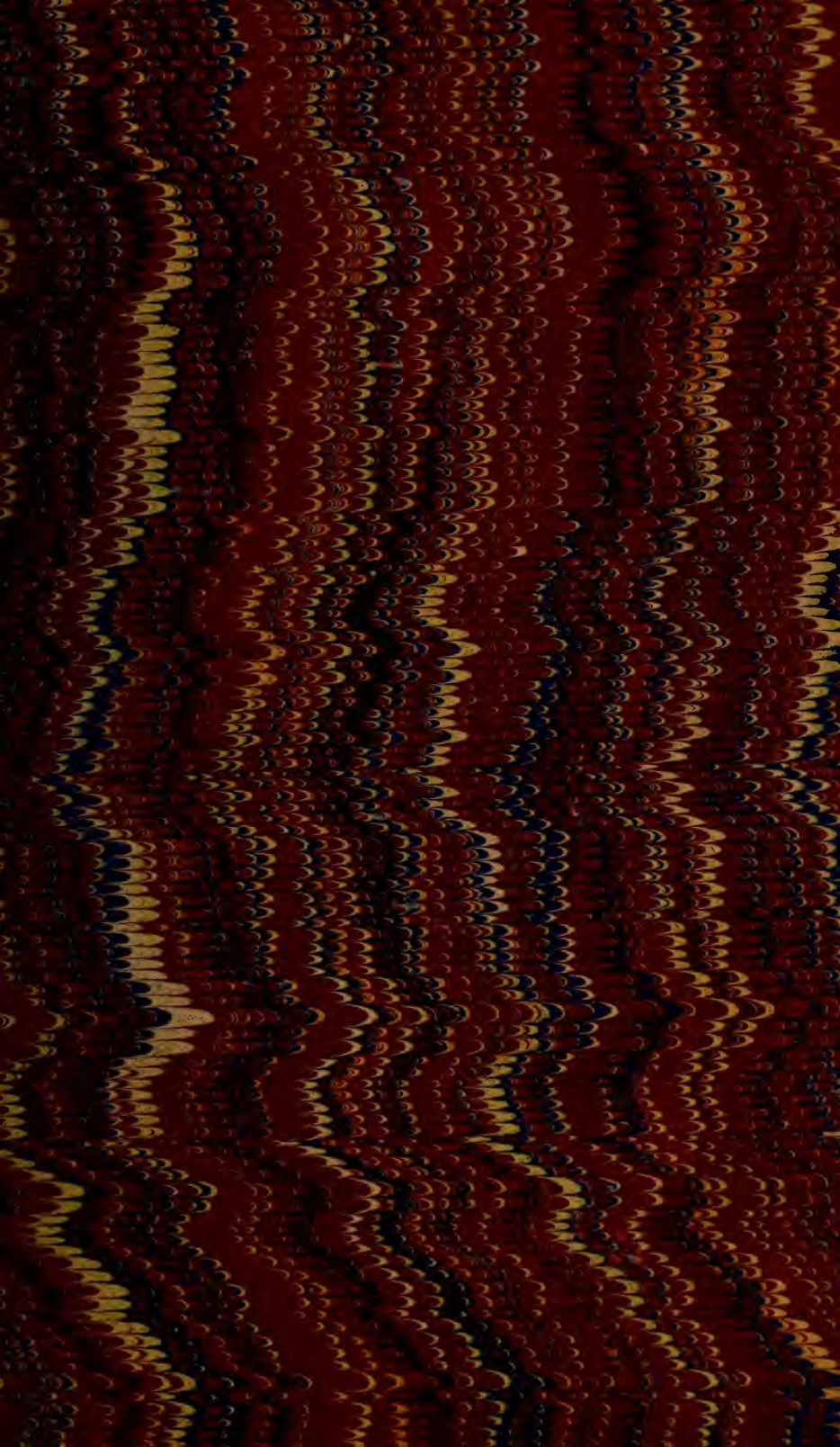
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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.



A LETTER

FROM

GERRIT SMITH

TO

ALBERT BARNES.

1868.

FOR SALE BY

REV. J. W. WEST, PETERBORO, N. Y.

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LETTER.

PETERBORO, December 25, 1867.

REV. DR. ALBERT BARNES, PHILADELPHIA :

MY DEAR SIR: If I remember rightly, I saw the following (perhaps in a book) years ago. I now see it in a newspaper, which ascribes it to your pen.

"I confess, for one, that I feel them, and feel them more sensibly and powerfully the more I look at them, and the longer I live. I do not understand these facts, and I make no advances toward understanding them. I do not know that I have a ray of light on this subject which I had not when the subject first flashed across my soul. I have read, to some extent, what wise and good men have written. I have looked at their theories and explanations. I have endeavored to weigh their arguments, for my whole soul pants for light and relief on these questions. But I get neither, and, in the distress and anguish of my own spirit, I confess that I see no light whatever. I see not one way to disclose to me why sin came into the world, why the earth is strewn with the dying and the dead, and why men must suffer to all eternity. I have never seen a particle of light thrown on these subjects that has given a moment's ease to my tortured mind, nor have I an explanation to offer, or a thought to suggest, which would be of relief to you. I trust other men, as they profess to do, understand this better than I do, and that they have not the anguish of spirit which I have. But I confess, when I look on a world of sinners and sufferers; upon death-beds and graveyards; upon the world of woe, filled with hosts to suffer forever; when I see my friends, my parents, my family, my people, my

fellow-citizens—when I look upon a whole race all involved in this sin and danger; and when I see the great mass of them wholly unconcerned, and when I feel that God only can save them, and yet He does not do it, I am struck dumb. It is all dark, dark to my soul, and I can not disguise it.”

You are a gifted and a good man, a learned and a just one; and yet you are a very unhappy one. “Anguish of spirit” is yours. Whence comes this? Confessedly from the violence which your theological creed does to your reason, and from your not daring to let your reason condemn your creed. Your reason sees not reason, but unreason, in that story of the forbidden fruit, which lies at the very basis of your theology. Nevertheless, you accept the story and its representation of a purely arbitrary and an utterly inexplicable dealing of God with man. It must be confessed that your creed corresponds with the story—the theological structure with its foundation. It must be confessed, too, that the more arbitrary and inexplicable a Theology of authority, the more suitable—especially so, because the more submissive, in that case, the superstitious disciples. Indeed, it has been held, that one of the strongest arguments for the truth of the Christian theology, and why it should be believed, is, that it is not understandable.

Instead of doubting the truth or wisdom of any part of your creed, you modestly suppose that, though *you* can not, others can, satisfactorily explain even the most revolting parts of it. So entire is your faith in your creed, and so meek is your spirit, that all the fault in the case you take to yourself, and never suspect that any (however small) share of it, is chargeable upon the creed. The creed—although it makes God the author of sin; the builder of an eternal hell; the one able to save men, and yet not saving them; in short, a monster of malignity—you, nevertheless, cling to. Why do you? It, surely, is not that you see any thing natural or reasonable in these horrible features of it, for there is nothing in all the realm of nature or reason to commend them to you; nothing in all the laws of evidence to justify you in regarding them as other than fancies and fictions. You know, indeed, that none of the Theologies, the Mohammedan, Christian, nor any other, can abide these laws. And, though you ought to know that a Theology should, above all other things, be tested

by them, you, nevertheless, accept yours upon mere authority—the mere authority too, of the ignorant, superstitious, benighted past. When I say that your Theology can not abide the laws of evidence, I do not fail to take into the account that the greater the intrinsic improbability of a statement (and how utterly improbable are some of the statements and stories in your Theology!) the more the evidence requisite to sustain the statement. But little evidence is necessary to prove that a man has died. That his breathless body went straightway into the sky could hardly be believed on any amount of evidence.

And why, too, will you cling to your creed when, notwithstanding the excellence of your head and heart, it makes you so very unhappy? The one answer to these questions is, that you have allowed authority to force the creed upon you. How abhorrent is a religion of authority, as illustrated by your unhappiness! Would that every religion of authority—that every such system of superstition and tyranny—were swept from the earth! Relieved of a creed which is so utterly defiant of nature and reason, you, with such a head and such a heart as are yours, could not fail to have large and happy views of the divine character and government. Do you turn upon me with the inquiry whether I, who am relieved of it, am favored with such views? I answer that I have neither your head nor your heart.

God is not the author of sin. You do not say directly that He is; and yet you seem to ascribe to sin a divine as well as mysterious origin. It is true that man is so made that he can sin; but, instead of complaining of this, we should be thankful for it. Instead of lamenting it, we should rejoice in it. How low a being would man be, were he of necessity sinless! How far inferior to what he now is, were he so constituted that he could not sin! He would be a mere machine, and his going right would no more argue wisdom and goodness in him than does the right-going of a clock argue wisdom and goodness in it. The brute, shut up to the direction of its instincts, can not err—can not wander from its nature. But Infinite Wisdom, instead of predetermining the steps of man, has left him to judge for himself. Great, indeed, is the hazard of his judging wrongly; but great, also, is the honor of being placed so high in the scale of creation as to be allowed to judge for one's self.

Blessed be God that He has made us capable of sinning; or, in other words, capable of transgressing the laws which He has written upon our being! It is not His fault if we transgress them; for He has written them so "plain, that he may run that readeth" the most essential of them; and honest and persistent study will compass the remainder. It is not His fault if we transgress them; for He has furnished us with abundant motives to keep them, and abundant dissuasives from breaking them. "Sin is the transgression of the law." This Bible definition of sin is the true one; and, therefore, it is not the Maker, but the breaker of the law who is the sinner, who is the author of sin, and who brings it into the world. By the way, this theological doctrine, that sin is a thing or entity, as is light or heat, and that God brought it, as well as them, into the world, is a great absurdity and a great blasphemy. Sin is simply a failure to obey law; and a failure for which man, and man alone, is responsible. I acknowledged the goodness of God in making us capable of sinning. I might have added, in making us capable of sinning so greatly. For to say that we can sin so greatly is, in effect, to say that we have great powers and advantages for learning and obeying law; it being only in the abuse of such powers and advantages that great sinning is possible. His nature, through the violation of whose laws man has become a great sinner, is the very same sublime nature through the keeping of whose laws he would have been a saint.

We ought not to be amazed at sin—either at frequent sin or even at great sin. That the wisest men should fall into sin is only because the wisest men may be ignorant of some of the laws of their being, physical or moral; and that the best men should fall into it is but that the virtue of the best men is not, as yet, proof against all temptations to violate the laws of their being. What wonder, then, that they who are neither wise nor virtuous should fall into it! Their exaggeration of the guilt or criminality of sin is not the least of the wrongs chargeable upon the Theologies. It not only tends to inspire the fear that we are abhorred instead of loved by God, but it, also, tends to make us less amiable and sacred in each other's eyes, and to make us coarse and cruel in our treatment of each other. The difference between our seeing each other to be small sinners or enormous

sinners can not fail of contributing to produce a corresponding difference in our conduct toward each other. That "God is angry with the wicked every day" was the fancy, not of those who knew the Loving Father of us all, but of those who pictured, in his stead, a revengeful and bloody Pagan deity! The stars, which shine sweetly upon all; the green earth, which, with its fruits and flowers, was made for all—these, and the impartial sun and rain, unitedly testify that God is Love, and that He never hates any one. Nothing can be more absurd than this ceaseless preaching that the least sin is, because committed against an infinitely great and good God, infinitely wicked, and, therefore, deserving of infinite punishment. The tendency of this preaching, as already intimated, is to make us look upon each other as monsters of wickedness; whereas we should, by considering the ignorance and temptations of men, regard their sins with all reasonable charitableness. The Just One, who knows our ignorance, and who saw fit, in appointing the first stage of our discipline, to put us into this world of temptations, pities us for our sufferings in this life; and, although these sufferings are mainly sin-induced, He, nevertheless, can have no heart to add to them punishment in the life to come. He has no curses for us. On the contrary, He does all that He can (compatibly with our freedom and power to thwart and counteract Him) to save us from cursing ourselves and cursing one another. Far am I from holding that there is no suffering in the next life. If there is sin there, (and I believe there is,) suffering is also there—for suffering necessarily attends sinning. All I mean to say, at this point, is, that God does not add punishment to this suffering; and that the only punishment in the case is that which is in this necessarily attendant suffering.

Doubtless, the day is coming when there will be comparatively little sin on the earth. Science, more than all other agencies, hastens the coming of this day. For we may reasonably hope that, when science shall have more fully revealed to men the laws of their being, obedience to these laws will be in greater proportion to the knowledge of them than it now is. Indeed, we may reasonably hope that men will not sin forever—that, if not in this life, nevertheless in the next, their increasing knowledge will conquer their ignorance, and their increasing virtue will

conquer their temptations. So far from falling in with the irrational and God-dishonoring doctrine, that the sinner will have no opportunities in the next life for reformation and improvement, we should allow reason and nature to inspire the expectation, that such opportunities will be far greater there than here.

That our views and treatment of one another are greatly modified by our conceptions of the Deity should not be doubted. Every people resembles its God. The justification of the Jew for hating the Gentiles was that his God hated them. The excessive punishments inflicted by the Jews did but harmonize with their conceptions of God. His cruelty was the warrant for theirs. We ought not to wonder that they put the man to death who "gathered sticks upon the Sabbath-day;" or that they punished with death disobedience to parents. These enormities grew largely out of their belief in that vindictive, bloody, monstrous God, who, unhappily, became the God of the Christian nations also. But it may be asked why, if these nations adopted the God of the Jews, do they not inflict as unreasonable and merciless punishments as the Jews did. The answer is—that their God has been changing, for a very long time. A civilization, increasingly science-shaped by the progress of science, has, for centuries, been encroaching upon the superstition, intolerance, and cruelty of the Christian Church, and softening the repulsive features of her God. Such pictures of the Deity, as her pulpits were wont to draw, no longer ago than the beginning of the present century, they would hardly be allowed to draw now. There lies before me a sermon preached, less than forty years ago, by Rev. Dr. Alvan Hyde, of Massachusetts, to justify the doctrine of the eternal damnation of infants. A Massachusetts audience would not tolerate such a sermon now. The Church will, ere long, have to let these grotesque and abhorrent Theologies go down-stream, if science and common sense but continue their present successful war upon them.

God has made no hell. All the hells are made by men. God puts no one into them. Men put themselves and one another into them. God's part is to keep them out and pull them out, so far as they will let Him. All His laws are to this end; and were all men obedient to them, not only would no one be in hell, but there would be no hell. I said that not only nature

and reason, but, also, all the laws of evidence are against your horrible creed. What, for instance, is the evidence that there is an eternal hell? It is, chiefly, one word said to have been spoken by Jesus. But how far it is from certain, that he spoke it, and, especially, that he spoke it, intending it to have the meaning given to it in our translation, and by our ecclesiastical standards! Although we have satisfactory evidence that he spoke substantially as the New Testament says he did, we have no right to believe that his speeches were, word for word, as recorded in that book. Again, Jesus did not claim to know all the future. There is no proof of the existence of any but man-made hells. And, although there are many persons who still believe in a God-made hell, (some of them, however, only because they have enemies whom they wish to put into it,) it is, nevertheless, gratifying to know that the intelligent man is now very rare to whom such a hell is an object of delightful contemplation. Where, now, could be found a person of sufficiently satanic spirit to exclaim, as did Tertullian, one of the most eminent of the Church Fathers: "How shall I admire, how laugh, how rejoice, how exult, when I behold so many proud monarchs and fancied gods groaning in the lowest abyss of darkness; so many magistrates, who persecuted the name of the Lord, liquefying in fiercer fires than they ever kindled against the Christians; so many sage philosophers, blushing in red-hot flames with their deluded scholars!"

"*God only can save them, and yet He does not do it.*" This is another of your great mistakes. God tries to save all men from sinning. But He has not the ability to save any man without the help of that man. Had He intended to retain such ability, He would not have "created man in His own image," and invested him with free agency, and the power to choose his character and destiny. When God made man so great, as to "will and to do" for himself, He made him too great to be saved by the direct and unaided power of even God himself. Men must work with God in accomplishing this salvation, or it can not be accomplished. Hence, instead of your sorrowing over God's not saving men, it would be less unreasonable in you to sorrow that He made man so great; so much like Himself; and, in some vital respects, so far beyond even the Divine control.

That "*the earth is strewn with the dead*" is, also, mysterious

to you. But it should not be. For several reasons we should be glad that men die, when their bodies are worn out with old age. Amongst these reasons are—1st. This life has, then, become more of a burden than an enjoyment. 2d. We trust that, at its termination, a higher life awaits us. 3d. Our death makes room for others to live—for an endless succession of generations to have experience of earthly existence. In the distant future, when men shall live wisely here, earth-life will be far more precious than it now is. Had the life of man extended to thousands of years, the inhabitants of the earth would have been but a handful compared with the aggregate souls of those unending generations. And in that case, there would have been not only comparatively few to know this life, but, consequently, comparatively few to be translated from it to the nobler life.

But, perhaps, your lamentation is over premature deaths only. They, certainly, should not be charged upon God. They come not from His hand. When men shall have learned, as they yet will learn, the laws of life and health; and shall, as they yet will, faithfully keep them, there will not only be few or none of these premature deaths, but the ordinary length of this existence will, probably, be at least double its present three-score and ten years. We should be very careful not to charge upon the Great and Good Father the evils, which come from the unnecessary ignorance and wilful sins of His children.

This creed, which makes you so unhappy—would that you could throw it away, and thereby encourage thousands to throw away their similar creed! But, I fear, that you still confound your Theology with your Religion—or, that you, at least, regard this greatest of all hinderances to your Religion as a help to it. I fear that your eyes have never yet been opened to see that the heaviest of all Earth's curses is the confounding of Religion, here with one, and there with another, of the Theologies. I fear that you still suffer yourself to call the Bible all true—though, in doing so, you, none the less because unconscious of it, insult God and make yourself the enemy of man. It is, indeed, the best of books—a repository of the sublimest inspirations, principles, and precepts. Nevertheless, it abounds in foolish, false, and exceedingly pernicious things. Its silly, and some of them very revolting, stories about the Red Sea, the

Sun and Moon, the Whale and Jonah, Lot's wife turning into salt, the control of the skies by Elijah's prayers, God's sending "lying spirits" into His children, etc., etc., have ever continued to feed to fatness the superstition of Christendom. The Bible's wicked curse upon Caanan has been the prevailing plea with so-called Christians for carrying fire and sword into Africa, and robbing her of tens of millions of her children. Its causeless and cruel wars, charged on God Himself, justify every war and every murder. Its one short line: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live," has cost the hanging and burning of many thousands of innocent women and not a few innocent men for the fanciful crime of witchcraft. Its making woman guilty of the first sin, and its charging chiefly upon that sin her pains in child-bearing, have gone far to justify man in stamping her with inferiority and in playing the tyrant over her. Its representing God to be the hater of men, and of some even before they were born, must go far toward making it impossible for those who believe in such a God, to have just minds and loving hearts. In its own words, "And what shall I say more?—for the time would fail me to tell of" all the foolish and abominable things in this book, which ecclesiastical authority commands us to gulp down entire, or, "without picking and culling," as one of my good old ministers required. I said the Bible was the best of books. It is such, when it is allowed to be read in freedom and with discrimination. But it is, perhaps, not too much to say that it is the worst of books, when read under authority, and with no liberty to call any of its words in question.

This belief that every word of the Bible is true—how much evil it has wrought! From this delusive belief has come the running to it to learn when the world will end. But for this superstitious use of the Bible, who, in Christendom, would have thought of the world's ever ending! "Millerism," however, and its frequent kindred predecessors in the past centuries, much as they have done, by their reliance on alleged Bible predictions, to agitate, unsettle, and afflict mankind, are but a faint illustration of the evil that has come from believing every word in the Bible to be true.

The longer I live, the more am I persuaded that wealth is what the world most needs for its redemption from ignorance, wickedness, and unhappiness. Enough of it is created by the

toiling poor, and, in point of fact, they are nearly all who do create it. Alas, that the misuse of much of it should be such, as to make the toiling poor poorer! War, intemperance, excessive luxury, and giddy, reckless fashion are great wasters of wealth; but no one of them wastes more than do the Theologies, directly and indirectly. For instance, if the Christian Theology had not so successfully passed itself off for the Christian Religion, these evils, which I have just now enumerated, would, so far as Christendom is concerned, have been far less extensive, and their waste of wealth correspondingly less. Then, look at the hundreds of millions, which it costs Christendom annually to build and support the churches and other establishments, which this Theology calls for! For, remember, that this expenditure is not to meet the demands of the simple Christ-Religion, but the demands of the various modifications and various sectarian shades of this mystic and miracle-stuffed Theology. It is the rivalry of the Theological sects, which calls for this vast expenditure. Plain halls would suffice for the assemblies of those, who seek to grow in this simple religion; and plain, loving-hearted men and women would be acceptable preachers in them, though the highest order of talent and culture should also be heard in them. Simple, as sweet, is the religion taught by the blessed Jesus—the one religion of nature and reason—the religion of doing as we would be done by—the babe-religion, (for He declares that even “babes” can understand it,) the religion, in short, which, according to Him, none need aid to understand, for He said to the people, to the promiscuous multitudes: “Yea, and why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?” Had Jesus believed that a Theology—a metaphysical system—was necessary to the elucidation of his religion, he would, at least, have said so; and, probably, would have furnished it. His simple religion, summed up in the obvious duty of loving our brother, and his, and our, common Father, it can hardly be said that He thought it necessary to explain. It is true that He often illustrated it, but it was by the simplest objects in nature, and in other ways scarcely less simple. Oh! how sad it is, that you and other wise and learned and good men should still persist in leading the people to look amongst metaphysics and mysteries for a religion so intelligible, as to be understood, the moment it is seen; and to look for it, too, amidst historical and

traditional uncertainties, when it is to be found, and found only, in the certainties of their consciousness! History and tradition suffice to inform us in matters where mistakes are not vital. But better is it to build our house upon the sand than to build our religion upon a foundation so uncertain as history and tradition. Nevertheless, upon this utterly untrustworthy foundation do nearly all men, in all lands, build their religion.

In this connection let me say how infinitely absurd is the doctrine, that a religion so simple and so obviously true as is the Christ-Religion, needs to be proved by miracles. The Theologies are not worth proving; and, therefore, no miracles are called for in their case.

After what I have said, it is hardly necessary to add, that men do not need to go to church to learn the Theologies, since the Theologies are far worse than merely worthless. Nor hardly necessary is it to add, that they need not go there to learn the Christ-Religion. Almost as superfluous is it to go there to learn this exceedingly simple Religion of nature, as it would be to go to school to learn how to breathe and swallow. The Christian preacher need spend very little time in teaching his hearers this Religion. They, already, know it. His work is to persuade them to love and practise it.

I spoke of the plain halls in which will be the future preaching of the plain Gospel. And how suitable, too, will they be for lecturers on natural science—for the geologist and astronomer! These lecturers will be immeasurably useful in clearing away the rubbish which ignorance has put in the way of religion. They will open books, and read from books, which can not deceive, and which go farther than all things else to save religion from sinking into superstition, sectarianism, and bigotry.

Very painful to me, and doubtless to you also, is the sight of so much of God's good earth, and so much of human industry, put to the production of tobacco and the materials for intoxicating drinks. But more painful it is to me, and I would it were also to you, to see wise and learned and good men at work to uphold these cracking and tottering structures of ignorance and superstition, which they should be at work, day and night, to demolish. It is even more desirable to see good heads and good hearts than good soils put to good uses.

The churches wonder at the rapid increase of what they

call "infidelity," but what is chiefly the casting off of the Theologies. They should not wonder at it. It is entirely unreasonable to expect that our science-enlightened age shall hold to the Theologies, constructed in an age of darkness—an age, when it was believed that the earth was a plane of only a few hundred miles in circumference, and, yet, of such paramount importance, that the sun, moon, and stars were made but to serve it—and an age, too, when it was believed that God's dealings with His children, instead of being directed by unvarying laws, were but the irregular and fitful impulses, now of His love and now of His hatred, now of His revenge and now of His repentance. How is it possible that Europe and America, having learned that the earth is but a speck in an illimitable universe, and that the unvarying laws, which govern both, leave no room for a passionate and changeful God, and no room for the working of miracles—how is it possible, I say, that they can much longer continue to have patience with these puerile Theologies? Europe and America will continue to go back to Asia for their Jesus Christ, since there has been but one Jesus Christ. But, they will cease to go back to her ignorance and superstition for materials out of which to construct their Theologies.

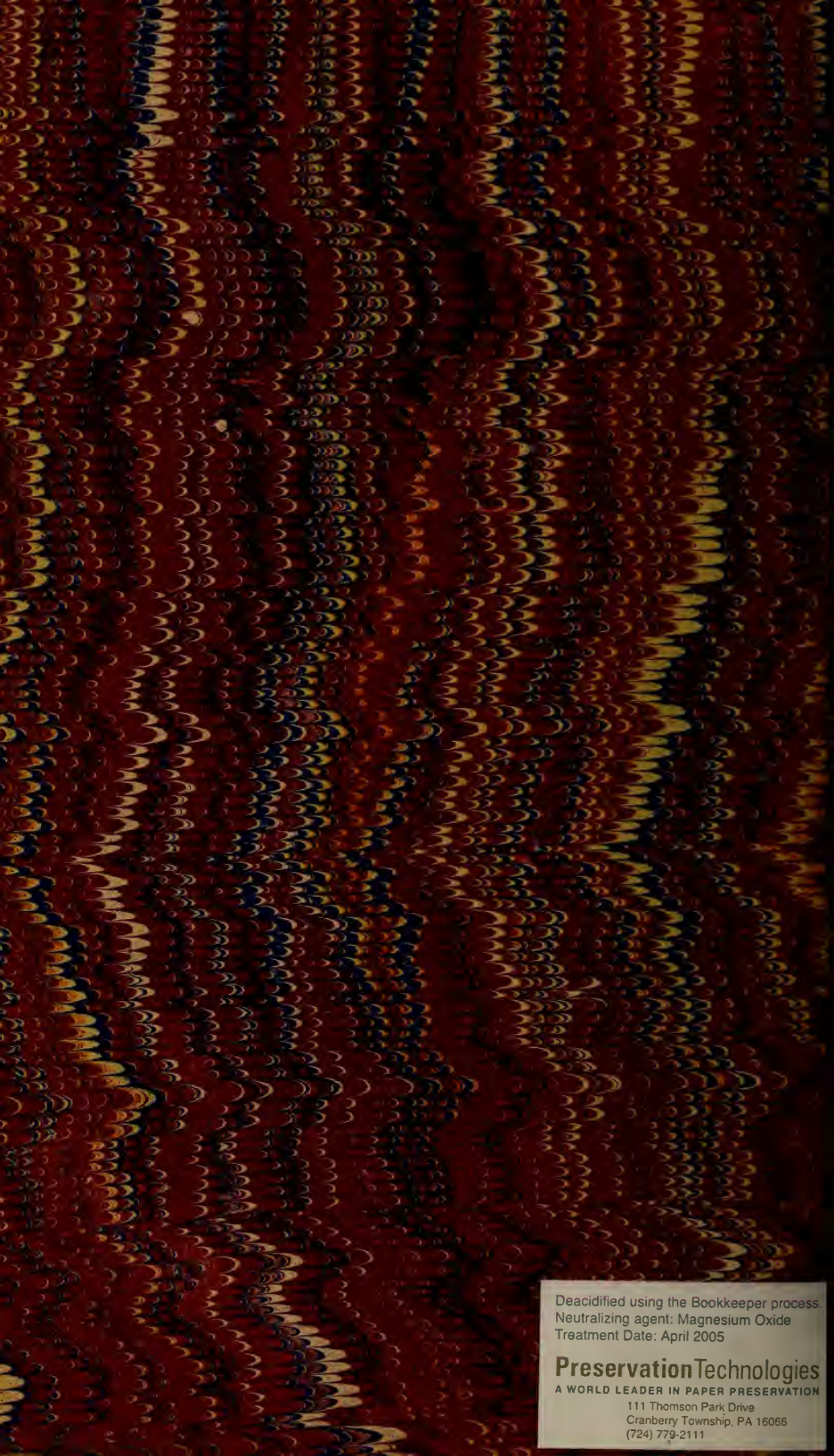
On the whole, my dear sir, I am glad, not only that you confess the extreme unhappiness, which this absurd creed of the "orthodox" gives you, but, (and I say it with all tenderness of heart toward your sufferings,) I am glad you are made so unhappy by this God-dishonoring and man-shriving creed. That you are made so unhappy by it, will induce very many to forsake it, and will hold back still more from embracing it. Great as are your sufferings from your creed, even you will not regret them, if you shall come to see how many of your fellow-men have been enlightened and warned by them.

With warm desires that these fancies, which so afflict you, may soon leave you, and that these fictions, which you have so unhappily allowed to usurp the place of truths, may soon be seen by you to be but fictions,

I remain, with great regard, your friend,

GERRIT SMITH.

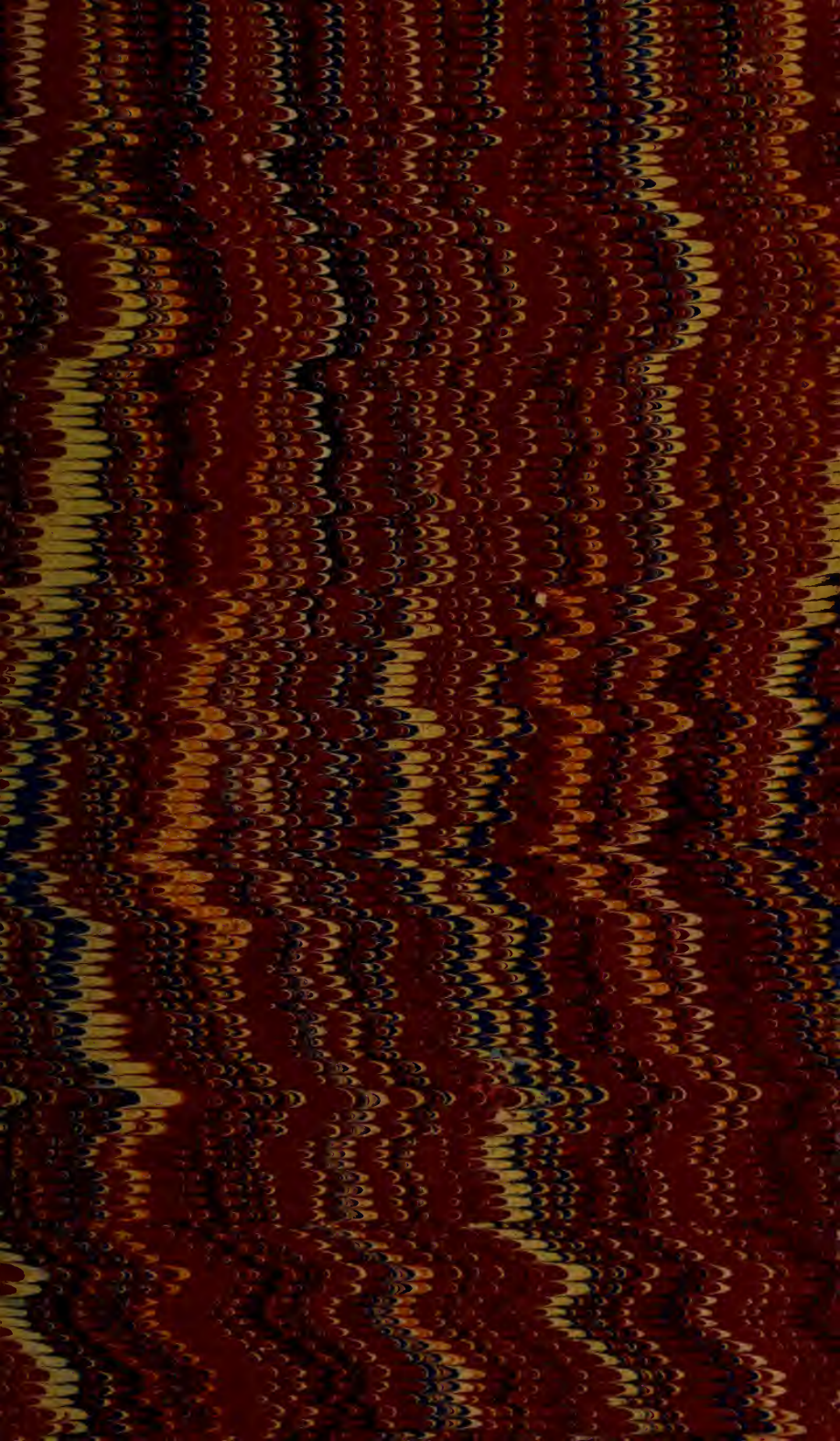
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